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ABSTRACT

Although both poetry and music have been used as therapeutic tools in individual and group counseling, few counselors use the techniques in combination. Poetry therapists tend to follow either the strucutred approach of Leedy, in which poems are used as treatment, or the less structured approach of Lerner, in which poems are used as medium. Music, like poetry, also has been used in both structured and less structured ways, to help clients express their feelings through others' music or their own combinations, and to help the therapist express his perceptions of the client. In group and family counseling, the combination of poetry and music can facilitate the counseling process by providing a nonthreatening vehicle for cognitive and affective expression. Two techniques which have been effective are reading a poem and inviting reactions, and creating collaborative poems. As in using any therapeutic tool, caution in regard to timing and appropriateness is necessary to ensure beneficial results. Limitations include a perception of the technique as academic and intellectual. On the positive side, poetry and music can help break defenses and expose material that may be overwhelming to the client at first. (A list of references is appended). (BL)

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Uses of Poetry and Music in Counseling

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Abstract

This paper examines the uses of poetry and music in individual, group, and family counseling. The Leedy versus Lerner method of using poetry in a therapeutic setting is explored. Ways of using poetry and music in counselor education is also discussed. The advantages and cautions of using poetry and music in counseling are mentioned. The authors advocate a preventive mental health approach, and recommend becoming more attuned to the poetry and music in our lives so there is less need for counseling.

Uses of Poetry and Music in Counseling

"When I see my baby, what do I see? Poetry! Poetry in Motion!" These words are from a pop rock and roll song of the early 1960's. Yet, today they are still sung and express part of the power of combining poetry and music. Poetry expresses uniqueness about a person or place. Music helps us hear as well as see that uniqueness.

In counseling, poetry and music may be used either separately or together to help individuals gain insight into themselves and others. Poetry has a long, and distinguished, history in the mental health profession. It was used along with other forms of bibliotherapy techniques in the "Moral Therapy" movement in England during the 1800's. Music also has quite a lenghty background. In the Bible, Saul, who was thought to suffer from manic-depressive episodes, frequently called in David to soothe him by playing music on the harp. Today, both poetry and music therapy are recognized disciplines in the mental health movement. Few individuals, however, use poetry and music together as part of a treatment modality. While this presentation will concentrate more on poetry than music in working with individuals, it will also focus on how the non-musical therapist can make use of modern day music to help counselees make progress in overcoming any mental handicaps they may have.

Use of Poetry With Individuals

Two of the best known poetry therapists in the nation are Jack Leedy and Art Lerner. Both have been Presidents of national associations for poetry therapy, and both have edited books on

poetry therapy (e.g. Leedy, 1969, 1973; Lerner, 1978). Despite these similarities, Leedy and Lerner differ in background and in how they use poetry with individuals. Leedy is a New York psychiatrist. Lerner is a California psychologist. Leedy is much more structured in the way he uses poetry in therapeutic settings. Kolodzey (1983) has quoted Leedy as saying: "Instead of one aspirin, take two poems" (p. 68). Leedy actually advocates certain poems be read by his patients who are having specific difficulties. For example, if a person were having trouble with insomnia, Leedy might suggest the person read "Hymn to the Night" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow or "To Sleep" by John Keats. On the other hand, if the person were anxious, Leedy might prescribe "Anxiety" by Paul F. Whitaker or "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" by Emily Dickinson. The point here is that poetry is used very systematically and almost like medicine by therapists who subscribe to the Leedy viewpoint.

Lerner is much freer in his use of poetry in a therapeutic setting. He believes that the client as well as the therapist should have an imput into what poems are used in a treatment session. How the poems are used is also open for discussion. One of Lerner's favorite techniques is to simply have a number of poems available for clients to read during a therapeutic session. The client picks a poem that expresses what he or she is feeling at the moment. Other clients, if there are others present, may discuss the feelings that the poem evokes in them also, or the client may relate to the therapist what his or her feelings are. The important point here is that the poem is used

as a counseling "tool" by Lerner. It is like any tool that the therapist may have. It can be used in a number of ways. Lerner believes that sometimes even the rhythm of a poem can make a difference in how a person feels after reading the poem. Thus, he includes foreign language poems among those available for his clients. Lerner also stresses the educational and preventive aspects of poetry in individuals' lives.

Most writers in the field of poetry in therapy have tended to use poetry with individuals in either the Leedy or Lerner model. There have been specific emphases though on different aspects of poetry in therapy. For example, Koch (1977) has emphasized how individuals, who claim to be non-poetic, can be taught to write and use poetry in a constructive way. Gladding (1977) has also emphasized working with clients in structured ways to write poetry that can be therapeutic. Furthermore, Gladding (1982) has advocated and presented ways that counselor educators can use poetry in training future counselors and therapists. Mazza (1981) has shown how poetry may be used as a therapeutic technique with adolescence, while Miller (1978) has demonstrated how poetry may be used with psychotic patients. Overall, there has been a proliferation of articles and research (e.g. Barlow, Pollio, and Fine, 1977) on the use of poetry in therapeutic settings during the 1970's and 1980 s.

Use of Music With Individuals

Music therapists, as well as the general public, realize that music can affect a person's mood. "Elevator music" is re-

laxing in nature and true to form is played in elevators, as well as doctor's offices. There is also "Grocery music", played in super markets, which while relaxing is also just upbeat enough to encourage the shopper to buy. "Military music", for example the tunes of John Philip Sousa, is geared to inspire the individual to become even more active and maybe even think of marching. The fact is that music surrounds us daily and influences our lives.

Many individuals surround themselves with a certain type of music. They like to listen to it because it makes them "happy", "mad", "inspired", "mellow", etc. Just like the use of poetry, music may be used in one of two general ways in a therapeutic setting. One way it may be employed is in the Leedy prescription style. If music is used in this way, a trained music therapist, along with other qualified mental health personnel, should be consulted. If, on the other hand, music is used more the way that Lerner advocates using poetry, a collaborative process is set up and the client and therapist may work more as a team.

We recommend the second way of using music in a therapeutic setting. It gives both the client and the therapist more room to experiment and try new things. It also implicitly gives both permission to not do something, which can be very beneficial in reducing resistance in therapy. We have used modern, popular music for the most part in working with clients we have seen. Basically, we have used it in three ways. (1) We have sometimes

asked our clients to bring into a counseling session a record, music, cassette tape, or words that describe their feelings at present. This request has usually been met with much enthusiasm, especially among adolescents. The music brought in has ranged from Beethoven to Barry Manilow. Either by listening to the music or reciting its lyrics, our clients have been able to get more in touch with their feelings. (2) A second way we have used music is to bring in records ourselves. Both of us prefer music that was written from the late 1960's on. We have been known to bring into our sessions older recordings on occasions though, especially if we are working with an older client. We usually play the record to express to the client how we see him or her (e.g. "Call me Mr. Lonely") or to relate to the client what we think might be going on in the counseling session (e.g. "The Games People Play"). We always give the client a chance to agree, disagree, and elaborate on the record we choose; (3) A final way we use music in counseling is by inviting the client to either make up or sing songs he or she has heard that express an important emotion. This is similar to Albert Ellis' (1980) technique of singing rational songs. We do not insist that songs made up or sung have to be rational. We do require that the client examine the song chosen, however, and elaborate on the personal meaning the song may have to him or her. This technique usually brings out many feelings that can be jointly explored.

Use of Poetry and Music in Group Counseling

The use of poetry and/or popular music can serve as helpful adjunctive techniques in group counseling. Many of the descriptive

reports published testify to the effectiveness of poetry in facilitating group process by providing a nonthreatening vehicle for expression (e.g. Buck and Kramer, 1974; Lessner, 1974: Mazza and Prescott, 1981). The use of popular music can also be helpful in reaching clients in both cognitive and affective domains (Boyum, 1978). The lyrical expressions of songs can elicit feelings from clients regarding current conflicts (Santiago, 1969). In a group setting this can provide both a validation or universalization of feelings and a springboard for group discussion.

Two of the techniques we have found particularly helpful in group counseling are: (1) Reading a poem to the group (or having the client(s) read the poem) and inviting reactions. The reactions may be directed to the poem as a whole or a particular line or image. It is important that the counselor not ask for the meaning of the poem unless it takes on the perspective of "What does it mean to you?" The selection of the poem may be prescriptive and based on the isoprinciple of choosing a poem close in mood to that of the client(s) (Leedy, 1969, p. 67), or open-ended poems could be utilized to facilitate self exploration (Lessner, 1974). An example of an open-ended poem would be Stephen Crane's "If I should cast..." A prescriptive poem would be Gibran's "On marriage." Prescriptive poems can provide validation and encouragement to clients. Open-ended poems are helpful in facilitating expression and exploration by connecting to universal feelings. When possible, copies of the poem should be distributed so that clients may have a visual reference and rapid access to the words. It can also

serve as a gift that clients can use at a later time. Providing the lyrics of popular songs and playing the record or tape of the song is another variation of this technique (e.g. John Denver's "Looking for Space"). (2) Collaborative poems (group poems) can be created by the entire group with each member contributing lines to the poem. This is often done toward the end of a session and usually reflects the current mood or predominant theme in a group. The counselor may facilitate the development of the poem by helping to determine the mood or theme and offering connecting words between lines. Each member of the group has the opportunity to contribute lines to the poem. It should be noted by the counselor, however, that even silent members have in some way contributed to the poem. It is useful to type the group poem and give copies to each member in the following session. It can provide a sense of accomplishment and permanence to members. It can also contribute further continuity between sessions.

The following is a collaborative poem constructed by college students in a short term counseling group:

Relationships

Endings and beginnings
Upon a never ending cycle
We learn something every time
About ourselves and others.
Through confrontation and compromise
We hope some clarity evolves.
The growth may be an ending or beginning
The direction is yet unknown. (Mazza, 1981, p. 143).

Use of Poetry and Music in Family Counseling and Counselor Training

Many of the same techniques utilized in individual and group counseling can also be utilized in family counseling. For example, a song such as Harry Chapin's "Cat's in the cradle" can help deal with parent-child relationships or the stress created when a parent's career takes him or her away from home a great deal of the time. Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem" which includes the line "What happens to a dream deferred?" can be utilized to deal with potentially explosive family situations when dreams or hopes are not realized. Robert Frost's "Road not taken" may be helpful in addressing the decision making process within families. The poems and/or songs provide a springboard for individual, couple or family exploration. The collaborative poem is also a valuable therapeutic tool with families. The stress as well as the strengths of families can be expressed through this vehicle. Patterns of communication and organization within families can be observed thus providing significant assessment information. The use of the arts have certainly been utilized before in family therapy (e.g. Guerin, 1976; Segal, 1981), however, the use of poetry with families is relatively new and warrants further investigation.

The use of poetry and/or music can be especially helpful in counselor training wherein individual, group and family counseling is involved. Gladding (1982) notes the role of poetry in counselor education programs and suggests five practical methods. One of those methods is to introduce poetry into group process or group counseling courses. It serves as a vehicle for discussion but

perhaps more importantly helps members learn about each other and group process itself. For example, Stephen Crane's poem "If I should cast off this tattered coat" helps members identify and express feeling of anxiety about being in a new group. Members are able to relate to the issue of risk taking. The collaborative poem could also be utilized to develop a greater sense of cohesiveness while providing material for further examination. One example that involved termination of a group therapy class follows:

endings

don't be afraid to soar
or sore
got to crack the shell
take the risk
of being ignored
or destroyed
or just being.
looking for strength
from within
from without
need to ask
scream
cry
reach out.
trust your needs
others have those needs too
trust yourself
trust the process...

This poem helped sensitize students to the issue of termination while providing closure for their own unique experience. In essence it was an ending and a beginning.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have discussed many of the advantages of using poetry and/or music in individual, family and group counseling. Our emphasis has been primarily using the techniques as therapeutic tools. These techniques do have limitations and require caution. They are not useful with all clients in all sessions. A careful consideration of the timing and appropriateness in using poetry or music is essential. The limitations include a perception of the technique as academic and intellectual. The use of poetry and music may be insulting to some clients. It may also support a client's defense mechanism; for example, intellectualizations which can hinder progress. On a positive side, poetry and music in therapy can help break defenses and expose material that may be overwhelming to the client at first. For the counselor, a key concern is individual and group comfort in using the technique.

The one very sweeping statement that could be made is that if we were more attuned to the poetry and music in our lives, there would be less need for poetry/music therapy or any other therapy for that matter. In a more conservative note, let us simply suggest that the techniques we described can be helpful with some clients at some time and under some conditions. Poems continue to remain unfinished and so does this article. For further investigation we suggest a look at our "Selected References."

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